

# Footprints

By

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The two of them sat, watching the fire crackle, waiting in terror for sunrise.

The fire would be enough to keep the beasts at bay this evening, she hoped. It had worked on successive evenings, so far, but she was unsure of just how intelligent the local wildlife was. If they caught on to the fact that the fire was little threat to them, that they could easily overwhelm the two, well...

She had a pistol with a few shots left. If nothing else, they could blow the holy hell out of whatever came at them, even if they couldn't get them all. She would die trying, at least. Trying for the both of them.

Jamie snuggled close to his mother. In the bush, something stirred.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Do you think they'll be back for us? Soon, I mean?"

She wanted to tell him she had no idea, and that, most likely, their weak little rescue signal had been completely ignored. Instead, she said, 'I think that they will. It's just that it's a long, long way from home, Jamie, and we don't know how long it's going to take for them to actually locate where we're at. So...we have to be brave. Your daddy was a very brave man, and I know you can be, too.'

At that he fell silent. He leaned back against her, letting his head fall, eventually, into her lap. She gently stroked his hair as he drifted to sleep. Beneath the insignificant thrill of his little snore, she could hear breathing. She could see eyes in the bushes, bouncing around like twin jets of fire.

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It had been the better part of three days, and the bullet-shaped hulk that they had arrived in lay, like a broken dream of salvation, buried halfway between the genteel crest of a rugged dune. She had scavenged whatever survival implements she could find--first-aid kit, dehydrated food, tackle, medicine, a perfectly useless radio communicator the operation of which she was not intimately familiar with, backpacks, tent, and additional blankets as well as a few odds and ends. Overall, the craft had been equipped pretty thoroughly, and she thanked good for small favors.

Jamie was still, apparently, experiencing something in the way of shock, as he spent most of the first two days standing quietly by himself, looking frightened and downcast, and being very quiet. He had no tears, yet, no complaints, and for this, she was also thankful. He was a “momma’s boy” after all. He and Jake had never been particularly close.

She put up the tent a little up the beach, nearer to the thick line of jungle and heavy brush that loomed darkly between the loveless arms of the cliff walls that hugged the beach on either side. She surmised that it might be quite some time before they left this place; it would also be some time before she made any decisions concerning how far they would go in exploring this strange, castaway home.

They had plenty of fresh water, but she knew it could not last forever, even with intense rationing. They would eventually have to strike out into the bush, if they were to have any hope of finding fresh water. That is, assuming rescuers didn’t swoop in to save the both of them in the nick of time.

She reminded herself, several times that first day, that wishing it wasn’t going to make it so. Until then, she would do the best she could for Jamie, and herself.

That first night, sitting in front of the tent, eating the bland MREs that had been stored in the vessel, Jamie began to perk-up a little, and she tried, as best she could, to make him feel reassured.

It was not easy, since she herself was terrified.

“Do you like your food, sport?”

“Uh-huh. Mommy, are we going to be all right? I mean, they’re going to come and get us, aren’t they?”

She paused for a click. In fact, she didn’t know that they weren’t going to perish here, on a speck of dust in the middle of an unexplored frontier that went on, quite literally, beyond the mind’s ability at comprehension. They had sent out a distress signal right before their departure, and she maintained hope that that signal would, soon, reach some passing vessel with the capability to locate and retrieve them before the elements and dangers of this new, radical environment, got to them first.

She was by training a botanist. She was not a survivalist. The boy’s father had been a survivor, and he had taught her a little, but...he was now dead. She was sure of it. Like a good captain, he had gone down with the ship.

Therefore, she was Mommy and Daddy now, for the both of them.

“Mommy, is Daddy going to be alright?”

“Daddy is going to be fine, sport. He’s probably on his way now. Now, go to sleep, we’re going to be just fine.”

He climbed in the tent. Soon, she could hear his snore, broken intermittently by troubled murmuring, as he wrestled, in his dreams, against the problems of his waking life. She sat at the mouth of tent; watching the black waves of the limitless sea wash over the jagged rocks, consume the bullet-nosed vessel, washing it free, with an awesome spray, from the gritty detritus that would soon build on it again. She reflected at how cool the nights were, here, how vast the stars, how hot and interminable the days. The sky seemed an ugly red streak of agony at the hottest moments. Now, at least, there, was a cool, mellow breeze, and the natural music of the night waves.

In addition, several times, she heard the rustle of animals in the brush, and became afraid, suddenly.

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It was early, when dawn crept, like an ugly eye emblazoned on the horizon, that she balanced her aching form on an old piece of driftwood, and stood, wincing at the pain in her side. Their arrival here had been a rough one, an intense crash, actually, and she feared that her injuries might be worse than she first expected. In addition, the heat made breathing difficult, and it was only the slight cool breeze coming off the water that provided anything in the way of respite from the oppressive heat. She decided to walk down the length of the beach, nearer the brush, making sure to be extremely careful though. It would be death for both of them if she had a serious accident here.

In addition, as a botanist, she could not suppress the natural curiosity she felt concerning the local flora and fauna. She felt, even now, a little professional responsibility to at the very least, get a quick, cautious first glance, though she would not dare touch any of it.

She could well imagine the hell of developing a rash or reaction from some unknown specimen. Might even kill her. Nevertheless, she had to at least take a look.

She walked toward the closest stand of trees, occasionally glancing back at the tent as it receded, slowly, into the distance. She stumbled a bit on the loose stones and fistfuls of debris that demarcated, loosely, where the beach ended and the jungle began. She peered into the blackness between razor-thin leaves, and saw a strange, terrifying world illuminated by sharp shafts of penetrating sunlight.

These shafts were defined in column-like rays, but they diffused greatly the deeper one peered into the dark expanse beyond. They insufficiently lighted the murk, but she did manage to see definition beyond the trees and vines, noting that there were clear patches, and large boulders, and rough undergrowth, and places that looked as if they had beaten down by twenty men with heavy wooden clubs.

Then she happened upon the footprints.

If she had not glanced down by chance, she might have

stepped over them or on them, completely missing the fact of their existence. As she glanced down at her feet, quite innocently, she was startled to see a pair of familiar tracks driven into the sand below.

She felt herself freeze, and gaped unbelievably.

The tracks were most unmistakably that of a human child.

So, this place was inhabited, after all. Natives. Who knows, possibly even cannibals. She shuddered, feeling her chest begin to heave with the force of her panic.

There were fifteen or twenty of them, in a single, straggling line, and they were not spaced too far apart. A small stride and five little baby toes on a perfectly shaped foot.

She found herself moving away from them, rapidly, as if the very presence of them promised danger, even death. She balanced herself on her staff, driving it down into the sand as she went, using it, as a balance for what she knew, now, was a more badly damaged body than she had first realized. Now, her pain and her terror were fighting each other for preeminence in her mind.

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It was later, with Jamie tucked away to sleep in the tent, that she allowed herself to think of the tiny toes of those mysterious footprints. Maybe, she surmised, it was not all bad.

The natives may be primitive and vicious, but they were also most likely very stupid. Perhaps they could be convinced to help them, the both of them. Perhaps a few deft tricks on her part and both of them would end up being worshipped as visiting gods. She threw a few more sticks of driftwood on the fire, reflectively.

Suddenly, she spied what appeared to be a strange, luminous cloud coming in over the water. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if she might not simply be hallucinating from exhaustion, but the cloud grew larger as it loomed closer, and seemed to even expand and divide as she stood, unbelievably, beneath it. A growing cacophony of strange screeches and heavy flapping suddenly broke forth on the breeze, and she realized that what she was seeing was an enormous flock of strange birds--more like a

swarm, really--circling overhead. They were, incredibly, luminescent.

"Jamie! Jamie, are you asleep? Come out here for a moment. You'll want to see this."

The boy (who had not been sleeping well anyway) thrust the flap of the tent open, and a few minutes later crawled out, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, Momma? What is it?"

She pointed at the racing, glowing cloud.

Suddenly, his face lit up. It was better than the Fourth of July.

"Wow! Look at that. What are they, Momma?"

"I think they're some kind of birds, honey."

"Man, there's a whole bunch of them up there."

She suddenly remembered the binoculars, and scooted around to her pack. Suddenly, a searing pain shot up her side, and she cried out, in spite of herself.

"Momma? Are you alright?"

*Do not let him know how bad it is. You have to keep his hopes up if you are going to get through this alive.*

"I'm fine honey. Fine. I think I just twisted a muscle or something. Here."

She thrust her hand into her pack, pulled out the binoculars. She put them in front of her face, adjusted the focus, and then handed them to Jamie.

"Here, have a look."

He put the comically large binoculars in front of his small eyes.

"Wow, I can see them! Wow! They have funny wings..."

She felt unease steal over her when he said that.

"Here, let me look again."

Indeed, they seemed to be a flock of giant glowing bats, although she could not guess what species of bat they might possibly be. Even at this great distance, she could see they were hideously ugly creatures, although details were hard to make out.

She also realized that some of them were dropping off from the main swarm, losing their glow, perhaps, as a means of

camouflage. They appeared to be executing nose-dives into the surf. She also could hear the muffled impact of a few of them on the beach, nearby.

She could hear the skittering crawl of little legs.

“Jamie, get in the tent.”

“What?”

“Get inside the tent! Do as I say, and don’t come back out until I tell you.”

He did as he was told. She stood, crouching apprehensively, listening to that skittering crawl. Several others, getting closer now, multiplied it. She wondered if the glow of the campfire might keep them at bay.

She picked up a piece of driftwood, wrapped her cloth bandanna around it, and held it in the fire. She then walked a little into the surrounding darkness, bearing her torch in front of her.

She took two steps, and felt her blood freeze in her veins.

Before her, crouched low on the sand was one of the flying abominations, a low crab-like arachnid with monstrous, membranous wings, twitching antenna, and grasping pincers. As it went forward, it oozed a trail of fetid slime that stank horribly, and she noted that it was soon joined by another, and another. Despite their awkward shapes, they seemed to be quite adept at moving across the ground.

*They are scavenging for food. Hunting.*

The creature closest to her suddenly leapt forward, testing her, and she repelled it with a swing of her makeshift torch.

It reacted with a hiss, skittering backward and then opening a comically large beak to mewl and growl sickeningly. She realized that a few more had moved into position now, that they were surrounding her.

In the tent, she could hear Jamie begin to bellow.

“Mommy, what is it? What are they?”

The boy could see vague shapes moving in the shadows thrown from the firelight. Suddenly, against one side of the tent, an enormous shadow loomed as one of the creatures reared

backward, opened its terrific wingspan, and sent up the same unnerving cry.

They were moving in closer. She suddenly remembered the flare gun in her pack, crouched downward to retrieve it, and felt the weight of it in her shaking, sweating palms.

She threw the torch at the creature nearest to her, watched as it caught fire and scampered backward in panic, and then aimed her flare gun at another. She fired, blowing the animal into chunks.

Hideous shrieks now filled the night.

The creatures began to scamper away, out of sight. She hoped that would scare them off, for a while at least. Of course, she knew they might also regroup later.

She felt herself fall backward, exhausted.

Beneath her, the ground wriggled.

A huge, leathery wing smacked her in the face, and searing pain shot through her leg.

She rolled over, almost falling into the fire, and began to kick. The thing was between her and tent. She savaged the pulpy face of the thing unmercifully, but it had gotten one of her legs in its claw, and the pain was unimaginable.

She bent forward, began to pistol-whip the thing with the butt of the flare gun, pulling back repellent streamers with each blow, but the pincer remained viciously locked to her ankle. A circular mouth, rimmed with fine teeth opened, worm-like, beneath the stupid, feral red eyes, it was trying to eat her leg.

She beat it as savagely as she could, finally assuring herself, after it began to cease squirming, to slow itself and finally cease gesticulating at all, that she had finally killed it. She limped forward, covered in the thing's filth, and went again for her pack, pulling out a knife with which to cut herself from its grip.

She suddenly remembered Jamie in the tent. She could hear the sound of his crying.

"M-mommy! Mommy, what's happening?"

"I'm just fine, Jamie!" She said, a little too loudly. She began to cut at the thing on her leg.



“Don’t come out yet, okay. Mommy is fine. I want you to stay in the tent though until I tell you its okay to come out. Got that?”

There was a short, snuffling pause, and the boy said “Okay.”

It took several agonized minutes, and pulling her ankle free from the pincer was like trying to pull apart a bear trap, but, finally, blood-soaked and seriously injured, she managed to extricate herself. The blood was heavy, and she immediately said, “Honey, I want you to pass me the box with the Red Cross on the front of it. Okay? Pass it out here. Okay?”

He did as he was told.

She bandaged herself as best she could; spraying disinfectant and going through several bloody cloths before she satisfied herself that she had done a thorough job. She also swallowed several sedative tablets. She then managed to throw the dead bulk of the thing into the fire, an act she instantly regretted, as the smell of its burning carcass was atrocious and hung heavy in the air for hours afterward.

She sat down to watch it burn, coughing and sputtering from the acrid smoke of the impromptu cremation. In her lap, she cradled the flare gun.

If they returned, she would be ready.

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It had been an awful night, but Jamie had finally seen Mommy settle down by the fire, and that had reassured him. That, and later, as he awoke in the darkness, a strange series of musical whispers had crept to his ears, like children his age, laughing and giggling amongst themselves. However, he supposed he was dreaming, and went back to sleep.

Later, in the pale wash of dawn, he got up, and Mommy was lying asleep on her side. He tried to rouse her. She would not awake. He realized then that her eyes were open. Her mouth was open, and a fly had perched on the edge of her lip.

He found himself in shock, at first, and then began to bawl. It was the most exquisite moment of fear and pain mixed together that he had ever yet experienced in life, and he would never forget

it as long as he lived. He fell to his knees, and did not move for a very long time.

He felt a small hand on his shoulder. He jumped to his feet, whirled around, and saw a little girl standing in front of him. Her clothes were ragged and her hair was wild, but, even through his tear-swollen eyes, he could see how kind her face was.

“I’m sorry for you,” she said. “But, that is what happens here. The adults don’t make it. They never do. Oh, I’m Katie.”

He was silent for a moment, and then said, his voice a tremulous quiver, “I’m Jamie. I’m from Earth.”

Katie smiled.

“I’m from Earth, too. C’mon, you’re going to live with us now.”

Moreover, to his amazement, out of the gloom of the surrounding trees and brush, suddenly appeared a troop of similarly clad children, all ragged and dirty, with staring, curious faces, and vibrant eyes.

He suddenly asked, “You said, ‘the adults don’t make it’. What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. You’re not the first. We all came from somewhere else once. And now we’re here. It’s the way it is. It’s how *he* wants it. Now, follow me.”

Later, the Children threw the bodies of the strange creatures out to sea, and tidied up the campsite. They treated the body of Jamie’s mother very respectfully, put it into the bullet-shaped escape pod after carefully wrapping it in the remains of the tent, and then closed the hatch. They managed to push the thing out to the incoming tide, and knew that it would carry the capsule far away, to the bottom of a watery grave.

As for Jamie, he followed Katie slowly, and then more quickly, watching her quickly little form disappears down the beach, carefully following her tiny footsteps.